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ABSTRACT

In an interdisciplinary curriculum for adults, four seminars were created that presented literature as reading, encouraged writing, and met the adult concern for relevance and shared learning. The four seminars focused on basic human concerns and relationships in a sequential ladder moving from individual to interpersonal to social and intellectual contexts: "Being Mature," "People in Families," "The Working Experience," and "Human Freedom." In each course students were asked to prepare one oral report and at least four short papers. The first written assignment asked students to respond in a personal way to the literature they had read; the second assignment asked them to use a theory or insight from another kind of writing to re-explore the imaginative works; the third assignment was an application of the theoretical writing to the student's life; and the fourth assignment was creative, often stimulated by a metaphor, and incorporating personal discoveries made during the seminar. By building writing into the process of self-discovery, teachers help students take responsibility for their written as well as their behavioral decisions. Appendixes include a brief annotated bibliography and a paper on the relationship of second sight courses to recent writing theory and research. (HOD)

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Sally Cunneen

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LEARNING TO TELL OUR STORIES

Sally Cunneen

Last year I hit both the bottom and the top as a teacher of college composition. The bottom came in a regular composition class with young students, summed up in the vehement remark of one: "I hate English because it's not about anything." The top came in a class called People in Families, one of four thematic seminars I designed and have taught for the last four years to groups of entering adults, varying in age from 21-80.

One ambitious young woman in this class - (I mean one who wants A's and a successful career after college)--reproved me for having the class read Willa Cather's My Antonia before Virginia Satir's Peoplemaking, an excellent popular guide to family therapy which helps people see the rules, systems and communication styles we adopt within families and to which we are usually blind. "If we had read the Satir first," she gently chided me, "We would have known what to look for in the novel."

Before I could react, several older students responded: "But the story told us so much more. It reminded us that life is complex, that we are all different. If we don't know that, we can't really apply Satir's theories to our own situations. Her theory comes from life, too, and it's good. But the novel goes deeper. It shows us that life comes before thought and that individuals can never be summed up."

The first anecdote conveys our common problem as teachers of composition today: the many students who take it because it is required, yet who find no value in writing because it seems disconnected from anything vital in their own lives. The second suggests the opportunity that adult learners and the ^{increasing} educational attention to stages of human development bring to us.

Arthur Chickering, one of the foremost proponents of curricular change to accomodate adults in Higher Education, warns us that a significant number of these students, particularly those from 23-35, will not want to take English any more than the young:

They need educational activities that integrate academic study with the heavy round of new experiences they are encountering.... We would predict least interest in the arts, humanities and foreign languages because the leisure for intellectual and cultural pursuits simply is not there, even though the interest may be. ¹

Paradoxically, however, psychologists have recently begun to emphasize the value of literature precisely for its ability to promote integrated human development. Carole Gilligan of the Harvard School of Education, for example, sees fictional works as central in moral education, "Not by virtue of the moral dilemmas that can be extracted from their texts, but because of their potential for extending experience through the study of other lives, past and ^{present.}"²

And psychoanalyst Willard Gaylin expresses the need to elicit life stories to encourage self-awareness and that fresh vision of the world so necessary to the growth of independent persons:

Granted the importance of our emotions and our confusion about them, they are worth a reexamination, particularly the elusive, neglected aspect of emotions called "feelings". To do so, we must fly in the face of the experts' advice--eschew objective analysis and return to the shadow world of the inexact, the poetic

and the subjective. What is necessary, then, is to start the process over again, to return to the period before the scientific revolution of the late nineteenth century to attempt once again a descriptive approach to feelings....It is time to unapologetically acknowledge that the anecdotal and descriptive can be worthy, respectable and in some areas absolutely essential. 3

With such prodding from psychologists, we English teachers should feel encouraged to approach our required writing courses freshly, taking on once again the traditional task of revealing the vital connection between stories, storytelling and the ability to live the life story more responsibly. In recent years the theories of developmental psychologists have been confirmed by converging theories of such researchers in reading and writing as James Britton and James Moffett. As a teacher, I had begun groping towards some new approaches which are themselves now supported by such theories, and it is these I want to share with you: first my experience in designing and teaching interdisciplinary orientation courses for adults which are 3-credit courses and qualify for the humanities elective.

Their design and curriculum grew out of my interaction with adult students taking composition in Continuing Education courses at the college in the early seventies. Those students were ^{researchers} everything./ have reported : highly motivated, rich in experience, lacking confidence in their academic abilities, but dubious about the value of academic theory and "highbrow" culture. They held strong private opinions and beliefs, but many were hesitant at sharing them openly.

Drawing on my experience of their needs combined with what I learned from aesthetic, pedagogical and psychological theory to support it, I created a set of four seminars which incorporated literature as reading, encouraged writing, and met the

adult concern for relevance and shared learning. Their overall name, SECOND SIGHT, reflects the program's use of literature with its characteristic emphasis on the distinction between appearance and reality and the adult ability to examine experience and turn it into personal knowledge.

The four courses focus on basic human concerns and relationships in a sequential ladder moving from individual to interpersonal to social and intellectual contexts: Being Mature, People in Families, The Working Experience, and Human Freedom. In each the adult desire for information is met and combined with a challenge to use new learning in order to look again at the raw material of experience.

Each of these seminars provides a good introduction to college, its methods and its disciplines. If taken one after the other in consecutive semesters, they provide an interconnecting network of contexts in which students can explore the relations between thought and experience. Each seminar moves from a broad overview of its theme in a historical context through common reading of good (but not too experimental or obscure)

fictional works, followed by books and articles from other fields dealing with the same subjects. Each student is asked to make an increasingly personal response to this material, to write about it and to share it with the class.

In 1980-81 the National Endowment for the Humanities funded these seminars at our college as a pilot adult entry program. The outside evaluator from the Center for Adult Education at Teacher's College, Columbia, found them remarkably successful as adult entry courses. In particular he pointed to the degree of change in critical consciousness and in growth of "dialectical approaches to learning among the participants as "highly unusual in formal learning" and attributed it to "the unusual

design of the educational experience, its student problem-oriented curriculum, the motivation of adult actively engaged in attempting to resolve dilemmas raised by their being involved in major life transitions and to the quality of the instruction." Having taught them often, I am inclined to believe that much of their effectiveness comes from the use of literature in course designed to evoke and dignify personal integration and communication.

For those interested in the design and curriculum of this program (eminently capable of local and personal adaptation), course descriptions and an annotated bibliography of some of the basic theory behind them are available. Here I would like to review a few difficulties in teaching them. Inevitably in courses in which young adults are strongly motivated to learn about particular realities like family life or work, the use of fiction will sooner or later be attacked. I welcome the moment, because it provides a needed opportunity to discuss explicitly the different ways of knowing that literature and theories from the social sciences represent. The session in which it occurs is always a breakthrough. This is not because the belligerent complainer who doesn't understand why we're wasting our time reading stories when we came here to do something serious" is convinced; this is hardly going to happen in one class. However, the group discussion fostered by the challenge is extremely helpful to those few students who have always found insight in story but were taught to think themselves odd. And it is equally important for the majority who come to discover that literature can be as valid a way of seeing the world as chemistry or sociology, and perhaps more useful to the integration of human beings in multiple contexts and relationships.

In addition, someone in each class will have difficulty reading fiction. Stick it out. A poor reading is better than none. Many of my students who had never been asked to read fiction in their crowded

business or nursing programs told me later that the difficulty was worth the mind-stretching exercise.

Happily, the courses have brought far more rewards than headaches. First, there is that moment in class when a bright-eyed student looks up and says hesitantly, "Such things don't happen only in literature; they happen in life, too."

After reading Great Expectations in The Being Mature class, for example, 70-year-old Bertha, who had been silent for weeks, reported that she had just remembered a childhood experience she had long buried because of the pain it had caused her: at age 6 she had been locked out of the house the day after her baby sister was born, without being told why, and then discovered that she was only adopted. The swift removal of her things from her beloved second floor bedroom to a stuffy, low-ceilinged attic prevented her from sleeping well for years. Until this class she could not recall why she continued to have this problem.

It did not take long for someone in the class to mention the relation Bertha's present occupation --ombudsmen to residents of nursing homes-- had to her own early experience. Another student pointed out that this work embodied the virtue of Erikson's last stages in the life cycle: caring for others in the face of death and thus affirming the value of life.

In each course I ask students to do one oral report and at least 4 short papers. The oral report provides a real audience for very different projects: they can be personal--perhaps a presentation of a family tree or a story of child abuse in People in Families; they can be investigative--a case study of a person fulfilled through work, for Working, interviews with the aged for Being Mature or an essay on the problem of freedom of institutionalized patients by a student who works in a group home, for Human Freedom. I urge

them to search out and share something they care about, and assure them they will be evaluated on interest and effort as well as content, not their degree of poise or professional delivery. They are invariably interested in each others' stories and come to know well / ^{people} very different from themselves.

I emphasize that writing assignments are primarily for self-discovery, though I will of course make grammatical corrections and suggestions. I tell them it is most important to communicate their/dawning ideas and opinions. For the majority, this direction has started a slow process of increasing joy and mastery in writing.

The first kind of assignment asks them to respond in a personal way to the literature they have read: they analyse characters in depth, they explore resemblances in the novels to their childhood memories. The next assignment asks them to use a theory or insight from another kind of writing to re-explore the imaginative works: Are there parallels between Pi's journey and Erikson's stages? Do Satir's rules for good communication give us ways of analysing the family relationships in Tillie Olsen's Yonnondio From the Thirties?

The third assignment will usually be an application of the theoretical writing to the students' life: does Bettelheim's or Peter Berger's essays on the family match your own experience? Does the chapter of E. F. Schumacher's book suggest limits of economic freedom in our job search? With Satir's guidelines, can we see the rules and systems in our families?

The fourth written assignment will be an imaginative one, often stimulated by a metaphor. If Gordon Parks chose a camera

instead of a knife as a weapon at a critical moment in his life, what would you say is the the weapon with which you have chosen to face life? (After the usual argument about not wanting to use weapons-- and the ensuing discussion of metaphor--another high point in each class--the papers/ ^{usually turn out very well.)} Sometimes in Working I ask/ ^{the students..to write} for epitaphs as a way or clarifying their priorities. Most often I try to make this creative assignment cumulative, a chance to integrate all the discoveries made throughout the seminar. In Human Freedom class we have a values clarification exercise with all the people we've encountered from Moses and Oedipus to Huck Finn and the heroine of Surfacing. Margaret Atwood's Students decide which they feel most sympathy for, which least, and which one they are most like. Or they may design their own Declaration of Independence, including what they have learned about themselves and the nature of freedom throughout the course. In Being Mature students write their own description of maturity at the beginning and again at the end of the course--sharing the results. When such assignments are made, students cannot simply learn one thing after another but are forced to incorporate earlier insights into new perception: in other words, gain Second Sight.

If any of you have the opportunity to teach similar interdisciplinary thematic courses I believe you will discover, as I have, that imaginative stories can evoke life stories even better than most psychological inventories. As you elicit and encourage the expression of individual feeling and opinion, you will have the satisfaction/ ^{people} of helping whole human beings develop, who are clear about the real distinctions between art and life, yet better able to proceed as artists of their own lives.

The other orientation course I teach at Rockland is a Life, Career and Educational Planning Course introduced in the last two years by psychologists and counselors to help students make more informed choices about their courses in the light of their interests, their talents, and their probable future careers. These courses are offshoots of a behaviorally oriented Life Skills class designed for disadvantaged urban job-seekers. They are a pilot application of such a program to the community college setting, sponsored and monitored by the National Institute of Mental Health. Several hundred students take these courses now each term in classes taught largely by psychology teachers and counselors, but open to any members of the faculty willing to take the training and use the basic methods and materials with their own teaching style and disciplinary insights.

The courses are structured to make students aware of the multiple pieces and patterns of their own development and to help them initiate their career research. Sharing is also built into the class, beginning with an initial visual representation of self through magic marker on newsprint and ending with a 5-minute video-taped representation of "Who I am and where I'm going." In between are pieces on learning styles, decision-making, the life cycle, values, ego, moral and intellectual development, career investigation and educational planning.

I have been moved and educated as an English teacher by students' efforts in these courses to see connections that reinforced a sense of self and of potential direction in their lives. I keep hearing of terrible pain, broken families, drug addiction and lack of attention from teachers. In instances where self-esteem is weak, it is

genuinely difficult to develop a controlling thought, use the active voice, or even write as a subject. For some students, it is as hard to identify and communicate their feelings and opinions, even though they are deep and powerful, as it was for Mrs. Gradgrind to locate the source of the pain she knew was floating around in the room somewhere.

This year I asked my students to summarize their findings about themselves in brief paragraphs in class, and to begin by putting the chief thing learned in the first sentence. It helped the majority to focus and gain something for themselves that was more than what they had learned from scores and lists. It was particularly useful for those who seldom entered the lively discussions.

Over the winter session the director and the other teachers of Life Skills courses decided to structure these paragraphs into the course itself because they had experienced the same student need to grasp what they were discovering. The problem was to convince these other teachers that we were not doing a disservice to the student by asking for expression without the usual strictures about rules of grammar and usage. They wanted neither to block the open communication they were building with students nor to deceive them into thinking that this kind of writing would get them A's in English 101.

Oddly enough, it did not occur to these teachers that progress in writing might be developmental, too. When told about the research of James Britton and James Moffet, which supports the belief that students should be required to handle linguistic and rhetorical structures in increasing levels of abstraction, differentiation and

sophistication, they were reassured. When they heard that Moffet, like Piaget, views the ability to shift levels of abstraction as a sign of mental growth, and that students should begin by tapping interior monologue and autobiography, they were convinced. They had observed this themselves, but needed an English teacher to confirm their observations. All of us felt that by building writing into the process of self-discovery, we were helping students take responsibility for their written decisions along with their behavioral ones. We were adding a central element in their ability to make decisions and to communicate them--the theme of the course.

NOTES

¹ Arthur W. Chickering and Robert J. Havighurst, "The Life Cycle," The Modern American College, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981m p. 37.

² Carole Gilligan, "Moral Development." The Modern American College, op. cit., p. 156.

³ Willard Gaylin, Feelings: Our Vital Signs, New York: Ballantine Books, 1979.

RELATIONSHIP OF SECOND SIGHT COURSES TO RECENT WRITING THEORY AND RESEARCH

The use of story as a mode of learning is congruent with advances in recent writing theory and research over the last decade and a half. This approach draws support particularly from the work of James Britton (1975) and James Moffett (1968; 1981).

In his comprehensive study of over 2,000 pieces of writing from British students in grades 1, 3, 5, 7, Britton discovered that as a writer develops, s/he does not develop the ability to cope with the various functions of language (i.e., transactional, poetic, expressive). The primary reason for this lack of skill was that students were not given enough opportunities to write in each function and for varying audiences. By seventh grade, for example, poetic and expressive functions seemed either undeveloped or deleted from school learning. Second Sight Courses, therefore, would attempt to develop the ability to cope with various functions of language, particularly the poetic and expressive. Poetic writing, as defined by Britton, is a patterned verbalization of the writer's feelings and ideas. This category is not restricted to poems but would include such writings as short story or shaped autobiographical episode. In addition, the courses would attempt to develop expressive writing ability; that is, language close to the self, displaying a close relationship with the reader, verbalizing his consciousness. This category would include such writings as letters, diaries, and journals.

Like Britton, James Moffett supports the belief that students should be required to handle linguistic and rhetorical structures in increasing levels of abstraction, differentiation, and sophistication.

However, he views the sequencing of these structures as critical to the development of writing ability. Like Piaget, Moffett views the ability to shift level of abstraction as a sign of mental growth (1968). In his Writing Program for Writing Across the Curriculum (1981), Moffett recommends that students tap, successively, their inner streams of sensations, memories, and ideas as raw material for recordings, narrative reports, and essays of generalization and theory. This cycle, he believes, is developmental and should begin with interior monologue and autobiography. Like Moffett's curriculum, Second Sight Courses would begin with interior monologue and autobiography to show students how to tap off and verbalize what is going on at any moment in their sensations, memories, thoughts, and feelings. As with Moffett's curriculum, Second Sight Courses would assume that the elaboration and expansion of small language structures into full discourses is itself a major dimension of growth.

Britton, James. The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18). London: Schools Council Publication, 1975.

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Aesthetic Theory:

Dewey, John, Art As Experience. New York: Capricorn, 1958. The classical, still vital work on the formal structures and characteristic effects of all the arts, stressing their origin in life and their unique ability to educate those who respond creatively to them. Cf. especially Ch. 2 "The Live Creature and 'Etherial Things'" for discussion of the rootedness of the highest art in the organic, and Ch. 3 "Having an Experience" for presentation of the theory that the artistic experience is a model for all experience.

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Murdoch, Iris, The Sovereignty of Good. A brief, incisive examination by the British novelist-philosopher of the difficulty of talking about profound human experience or emotion within the limited linguistic world of moral analysis. In Parts Two and Three, she offers the clear vision of the artist as the best evidence that truth can be seen by human eyes. Art, and especially literature, are the most educational of human enterprises, for they teach us to pay attention.

Wellek, René, and Warren, Austin, Theory of Literature. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949. Chapter 3 reviews the function of literature and concludes that it is "true" but not "truth". The authors point to Horace's judgment of poetry as "dulce et utile" as the best perennial summary of the dialectic inherent in the history of aesthetics.

Psychological Theory:

James, William, "The Stream of Thought," The Writings of William James, ed. John J. McDermott. New York: Modern Library, 1968, pp. 21-74. The psychologist discusses here the selective attention present in all perception and emphasizes the personal, imaginative character of the human thought process and its similarity to the artist's creation.

Winnicott, D. W. Playing and Reality. London: Tavistock Publications, 1971. In this volume the English psychoanalyst develops his influential theory of the "transitional object" as the symbol in a "potential space" through which the user mixes inner and outer reality. He analyses the process thoughtfully from Teddy Bear to great work of literature. The process this theory explores underlies much of the work of creative interpretation of Norman Holland and the Literature and Psychology Program at SUNY Buffalo. Murray Schwarz credits Winnicott with defining the critical act as "an interpretation, a coming between the opposition of subject and object, here and there, me and you." Cf. "Where is Literature"? College English, March 1975, Vol 36, No. 7, p. 764.